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ABSTRACT

This study compared teacher-rated classroom ability groupings with total reading scores reported on standardized tests. Kindergarten teachers divided their students into three groups according to how well they had mastered a set of criteria which the teachers felt represented the successful reader and writer at the end of kindergarten. Results indicated a significant relationship among the groups and the total reading score obtained on the standardized test. In an effort to help those teachers who felt they needed to become better assessors in order to make daily instructional decisions, the school year was spent clarifying their instructional philosophy and creating a variety of informal assessment tools based on that philosophy. What resulted was a refinement of the conception of the successful reader and writer at the end of kindergarten that enabled teachers to structure their instruction and to begin to plan a series of observations. At the end of the 1989-1990 school year the kindergarten teachers again divided their students into three groups based on their refined conception of a successful reader and writer at the end of kindergarten. A comparison of these classroom ability groupings with the total reading test scores reported on the reading test showed that again there was a significant relationship. While the kindergarten teachers used their informal assessment to make daily instructional decisions and to report to parents, the same informal measures were not given a great deal of credibility by first grade teachers who did not share a similar instructional philosophy. (Two tables of data and two figures are included.) (MG)

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College Reading Association 1990

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INTRODUCTION

A number of reading researchers have pointed out that early reading assessment has not kept pace with advances in reading research, theory, and practice. At the same time early childhood experts argue that children are being tested too early and that extensive testing narrows and misdirects the curriculum and drains instructional time without a clear demonstration that the investment is beneficial. In addition, groups as diverse as the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), and the national PTA have recently spoken out to urge states to abandon the use of multiple-choice tests and to replace them with new forms of assessment that will provide "genuine accountability". Two years ago I began to study a variety of standardized readiness and early reading tests. I reported the results of that survey at this conference last year. To review briefly, I found that such tests.

- have stayed the same for virtually sixty years. They reflect behavioral research that assumes that literacy can only be taught through the direct instruction of isolated skills which are hierarchically organized and mastered one level at a time.
- are inappropriate for literacy assessment based on a holistic philosophy because they measure only reading skills and ignore other components of literacy such as speaking, listening, and writing, components which we now realize are highly correlated with success in reading. And even in reading these tests measure only a narrow range of the knowledge and skills involved. For

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instance the readiness and early reading tests I surveyed focused on phonic skills and vocabulary recognition, ignoring other important aspects such as background knowledge, directionality, print awareness, other word recognition strategies, comprehension strategies, appreciation of books, and interest in reading and writing.

- are divorced from the reality of authentic reading and writing situations. They depend on multiple choice questions and the materials read consist of single letters, words, and sentences, or very brief passages. Furthermore, pupils background knowledge and interests are ignored; the tests are timed, and pupils are not allowed to consult with one another. Obviously, such materials and settings are as far from authentic reading and writing situations as possible!

Unfortunately, because it is easy to get a false sense of security when skilled reading is equated with scores on reading tests, many school personnel believe that data from standardized tests are more trustworthy than data collected by other means.

THE PROBLEM

After completing the survey of early reading tests, I began investigating the primary level (K-2 grade) literacy program and assessment tools of a school district in a small suburban community. This district tested it's students each May with a widely used standardized test battery. After interviewing the kindergarten teachers I discovered that they administered standardized reading achievement tests to students very reluctantly. They resented the time that the administration of the test took from instruction, the pressures that it put on the curriculum, and the frustration that it exerted on their students. In addition, because these

teachers were beginning to base their instruction on the whole language philosophy, they felt the need to have a variety of assessment tools for the everyday instructional decison-making that is a crucial part of that philosophy. But they were not sure how to use informal assessment and, even they, wondered whether the infomal tools could provide valid and reliable data.

How could informal assessment be organized so that it yielded information for effective and efficient decision-making? What kind of information would the next year's teacher want? Would that teacher use information from informal assessment? How would the teacher ranking's of students based on informal assessment compare to rankings that the students received on the standardized test?

THE STUDY

Rankings

In May of 1988 before they administered the standardized achievement test, I asked the kindergarten teachers to group their students into three groups according to how well they had mastered a set of criteria which they felt represented the successful reader and writer at the end of kindergarten. Among the criteria reported by the teachers were the following:

- attitude toward books and reading/writing
- recognition of the letters of the alphabet
- knowledge of grapheme/phonemen correspondences
- use of invented spelling in writing
- ability to listen to and comprehend stories
- ability to read independently
- general maturity (following directions and keep to a task)

On the other hand, the standardized test which was administered purported to assess skills in auditory discrimination, grapheme/phoneme correspondence, decoding, and comprehension of decontextualized sentences.

A comparison of the teacher rated classroom ability groupings with the total reading scores reported on the standardized test showed that there was a significant relationship between the groups in which the teachers placed their students and the total reading score obtained by the students on the standardized test. The degree of the relationship between the teacher ranked groups and the test scores was computed by using the Pearson Product Moment correlation coefficicent. Correlations for the classes ranged from .57-.87 ($p < .01$) A correlation of .72 ($p < .01$) was found over all teachers.

(Insert Table One about here)

The coefficient of determination (r^2) for the entire set of classroom groupings is equal to .52. Thus, approximately fifty percent of the variation between the total teacher groupings and the total test scores appeared to be due to some common factors. The rest of the variation implied that the teacher and the test were tapping different factors for the other 48 percent. This result was not surprising because, as noted earlier, the teachers reported utilizing the youngsters' knowledge of a wider variety of strategies, concepts, and atttitudes as criteria for their decisions than the test did.

Informal Assessment

Those same kindergarten teachers indicated an interest in refining their informal assessment skills. First they needed to become better assessors in order to make the many daily instructional decisions that take place in the classroom every day. And second, they hoped that if they became more professional about assessment then they might convince their administrators and school board to ban standardized testing in the kindergarten. To this end, we began to meet to work through what the philosophy behind their instructional program was. These discussions proved very interesting because they pointed out the philosophical differences that these four teachers brought to their classroom instruction. While one teacher had read a great deal about the whole language philosophy, had attended several conferences on the topic, and was already using many of the instructional techniques associated with it in her daily instruction, another one had merely begun to think that maybe there was another way to teach reading and writing than the way she had been doing it in the past and the others were somewhere in- between.

What followed during the school year was a concerted effort on the part of all of these teachers to acquaint themselves with the literature on the whole language philosophy and to discuss it's significance for their program. In adition, with my help they investigated and tried a wide variety of informal assessment techniques. What resulted was a refinement of their conception of the successful reader and writer at the end of kindergarten that enabled them to structure their instruction and to begin to plan a series of observations which previously had been "catch as catch can." For instance, after many discussions they devised two observational tools for their classrooms. One of these was aimed at the assessment of reading strategies and the other at the assessment of writing strategies.

(Insert Figures One and Two about here)

Another Ranking

At the end of the 89-90 school-year the kindergarten teachers again grouped their students into three groups according to how well they had mastered a set of criteria which the teacher felt represented the successful reader and writer at the end of kindergarten. The criteria used were primarily those on the two observation lists, as well as a general maturity factor. The standardized test which was administered was the same one as the year before.

A comparison of these classroom ability groupings with the total reading test scores reported on the reading test showed that again there was a significant relationship between the groups in which the teachers placed their students and the total reading score obtained by the students on the standardized test. The degree of the relationship between the teacher ranked groups and the test scores was computed by using the Pearson Product Moment correlation coefficicent. Correlations for the classes ranged from .62-.75 ($p < .001$) A correlation of .67 ($p < .001$) was found over all teachers.

(Insert Table Two about here)

The coefficient of determination (r^2) for the entire set of classroom groupings is equal to .44. Thus, approximately forty-five percent of the variation between the total teacher groupings and the total test scores appeared to be due to some common factors. The rest of the variation

implied that the teacher and the test were tapping different factors for the other 55 percent. Again, this result was not surprising because, as noted earlier, the teachers reported utilizing the youngsters' knowledge of a wider variety of strategies, concepts, and attitudes as criteria for their decisions than the test did.

These teachers had spent an entire school year clarifying their instructional philosophy and they had spent time creating a variety of informal assessment tools based on that philosophy. Did this change the way in which their rankings compared with the test results? These data are currently being statistically analyzed, but if one "eye-balls" them, it appears that the range of the relationship between the teachers rankings and the test scores changed from .57 -.89 to .62 -.75 and the correlation across all teachers changed from .72 to .67. While I cannot say what the statistical significance of these changes is, it can be noted that the teachers as a whole this past year were tapping an even wider set of variables than they did the previous year because the coefficient of determination changed from .52-.44.

This Fall I interviewed first grade teachers about their use of and perceptions of the standardized test results and the informal assessment information from the 89-90 school year. They reported that standardized conventional early reading tests given four months earlier could hardly provide useful results in light of the fact that children grow and learn so rapidly at this age. These teachers felt that the danger of misdiagnosis or mislabeling might be greater for these children than at any other stage in their academic development. While some of these first grade teachers did share the results of the end of kindergarten test with first grade parents at the first parent-teacher conference in mid November, they did so

because it had "always been done and the parents seemed to expect it", not because the teachers believed that the tests revealed anything special about the children in question.

The first grade teachers reported that they preferred to base their initial instructional decisions on two major sources. One of these was the information which kindergarten teachers passed on about each of their students. The kindergarten teachers ranked their youngsters as being high, middle, or low in reading/writing ability. They also reported such other information as the letters which the students could recognize, the grapheme/phoneme correspondences which the student could make as evidenced in writing samples and the way in which the students related to print in the classroom.

However, interviews revealed that by and large these first grade teachers were most comfortable with their own assessment of the students. Therefore, the source of information which the first grade teachers favored most over the test results was their own work with the students during the first few weeks of school. While two of the six first grade teachers were firmly committed to the whole language philosophy of teaching, the others were not sure that it was not "just another fad." The type of informal assesment done by the kindergarten teachers was viewed as another part of that fad. The first grade teachers appeared to be saying that while they did not believe that the standardized test results were particularly helpful to them when they attempted to make instructional decisions, neither were the more informal assessments passed on to them by the kindergarten teachers who were basing their instruction on, in some cases, an entirely different instructional philosophy.

Thus it appears that while the kindergarten teachers used their informal assessment to make daily instructional decions and to report to parents, the same informal measures were not given a great deal of credibility by first grade teachers who did not share a similar instructional philosophy. Until the school comes to terms with the differences in philosophies, the kindergarten teachers will probably have a difficult time selling their type of informal assessment to other teachers and to the administration.

TABLE ONE

Analysis of Variance

Nested Placement within Teacher and Total SRA Test Scores

1989

Tests of Significance for Total Score Using Unique Sums of Squares

Source of Variation	SS	DF	MS	F	Sig. of F
Within Cells	110.74	111	1.00		
Placement Within Teacher	177.17	14	12.65	12.68	<.01

Pearson Correlation Coefficients

Placement with Total Score over All teachers and for Each Class

1989

	Total SRA Score
All Teachers' Placements	.72*
Classroom 1	.61*
Classroom 2	.86 *
Classroom 3	.72*
Classroom 4	.87 *
Classroom 5	.85*
Classroom 6	.72*
Classroom 7	.57*

* p <.01

TABLE TWO

Analysis of Variance

Nested Placement within Teacher and Total SRA Test Scores

1990

Tests of Significance for Total Score Using Unique Sums of Squares

Source of Variation	SS	DF	MS	F	Sig. of F
Within Cells	18.35	128	.14		
Placement Within Teacher	20.33	8	2.54	17.72	<.001

Pearson Correlation Coefficients

Placement with Total Score over All teachers and for Each Class

1990

	Total SRA Score
All Teachers' Placements	.67*
Classroom 1	.72*
Classroom 2	.74*
Classroom 3	.75*
Classroom 4	.62*

* p <.01

FIGURE ONE

Informal Assessment: Emergent and Early Reading Strategies

NAME:_____

\+ = knows

* = learning DATES:

Identifies front of book_____

Knows where to start reading_____

Aware of page turning direction_____

Aware of top-bottom reading_____

Aware of left-right_____

Aware of return sweep_____

Knows punctuation

- period _____
- question mark_____
- exclamation mark_____
- other_____

Can identify a letter_____

Can identify a word_____

Knows print contains message_____

Finger pointing

- no attempt_____
- slides across_____
- word by word_____

Knows Book Terms

- cover_____
- title_____
- title page_____
- author_____
- illustrator_____
- page #s_____
- other_____

Notes.

Informal Assessment -Reading Cont'd

NAME:_____

+ = knows
* = learning

DATES.

Story Retelling/Reading
- own version_____
- retells all important points_____
  - retells parts_____
  - retells almost none_____
- partially memorized_____
- memorized_____
- partially reading print_____
- reads all print_____

Knows g/p correspondence (circle)

b c d f g h j k
l m n p q r s t
v w x y z
a e i o u

Sight words:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

FIGURE TWO
Informal Assessment: Writing Strategies

NAME_____

+= knows
*= learning DATES.

Drawing
- simple_____
- detailed_____
- dictates story_____

Scribble writing
- uncontrolled_____
- controlled_____
- left /right_____
- top/bottom_____
- random letters_____

Copies words _____

Invented spelling
- initial consonants_____
- initial & final _____
- vowels-incorrect_____
- vowels-correct_____
- some standard_____
- most standard_____

Spacing
- strings of letters_____
- space between letters_____
- strings of words_____
- space between words_____

Composition
- labels/words_____
- phrases/sentences_____

Informal Assessment: Writing Strategies cont.d.

NAME:_____

+=knows

*=learning DATES:

Storyline

new theme each page_____

theme continuity_____

lit. influence/pattern book_____

fiction_____

non-fiction_____

Punctuation

periods rarely_____

end of sentence_____

overuse_____

question mark rarely_____

end of sentence_____

overuse_____

exclamation mark rarely_____

end of sentence_____

overuse_____

other_____

Handwriting

all caps_____

caps and lower case_____

Work Style

works alone_____

asks peers for help_____

helps others_____

shares and discusses ideas_____

NOTES:

Informal Assessment: Writing Strategies cont.d.

NAME._____

+=knows
*-learning DATES.

Interest
- journal writing
  - writes on own_____
  - writes when asked_____
  - must be coaxed_____
- center writing
  - chooses to write_____
  - prefers to dictate_____
  - writes books_____

Sharing Time
- chooses not to share_____
- describes picture-simple_____
  complex_____
- reads words_____
  - points to words when reading_____
  - uses expression when reading_____
- adds info when asked_____
- listens to others_____
- asks questions of others_____
- responds with write/book talk_____
- confused telling and/or asking_____

Notes:_____